



Photographer Massimo Vitali at his home in Tuscany, with the photograph *Pic Nic Allée*, 2000. See Resources.



Massimo Vitali

With his expansive landscapes, the Italian photographer takes a sharp view of leisurely pursuits

By David Colman

Artistic careers are born all sorts of ways, from the slow, persistent honing of a creative ideal to a sudden spark fresh from art school and onto the cover of *Artforum*.

Massimo Vitali's career, however, was precipitated by theft.

By the early 1990s, the Italian-born Vitali was an established photojournalist and a director of photography for films. But he was tired of what he was doing, and started casting about for a new challenge—he didn't know what, exactly.

Then one day someone burgled his car and stole two of his beloved cameras, leaving the one thing in the automobile too big to heist: a huge 8 x 10 large-format view camera. "I had used it maybe twice before," says the photographer, recalling his dismay at being left with a piece of equipment he didn't actually need. Yes, it takes beautiful pictures, but the camera's unwieldy size and extra-large negative (which >



Papeete Beach Regatta, 2004.

Riccione Diptych, 1997.



Frigido Ferragosto, 2006.



Lernpark, 2001.

De Haan Kiss, 2001.

usually demands the utter stillness of a tripod) all but necessitate shooting in a photo studio. But as many artists have found, there's nothing like an obstacle in a troublesome medium to fire one's imagination. For Vitali, this meant having to invent a way to continue taking pictures outdoors. In the process, he developed a point of view that is distinctive both literally and figuratively.

"I wanted everything sharp, everything in focus," says Vitali, who lives in the Tuscan town of Lucca. That edict led him to construct a 20-foot-high scaffold on which to perch, allowing him enough distance from his subjects—most often people at the beach and in other leisure spots—to capture everything in focus, even the far-off background. Meanwhile, the large negative renders an astonishingly crisp image when printed in oversize dimensions—a typical Vitali print measures 72 by 86 inches—that loses none of its minute detail.

Clarity is a mainstay of the photographer's work. "When you shoot as a photojournalist, there's always something in the photo that is the center of attention," he explains. In other words, the picture is



composed in a way to tell a story. "When you look at the images that you see every day in magazines or newspapers, they all tend to be easy—ones you can understand and consume in a second," he says. "It's a different way of taking pictures."

Vitali consciously dropped this more manipulative practice and instead attempted to give his images no focal point. "I am very patient," he explains. "All I am looking for is the moment to have a rather complex situation." His timing couldn't have been better. His first beach-ramas came along in 1994, just as the art world was developing a taste for fine-art photography, and his sweeping, banal style hit the same bull's-eye as that of Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, and Thomas Struth.

Over the next decade, Vitali stuck to his closely defined conceptual guns. A lavish 2004 Steidl imprint of his work, aptly titled *Landscape with Figures*, is a kind of *Where's Waldo* experience—minus Waldo. Looking at the panoramas, the restless eye scans almost unconsciously for the story, for the focus, but Vitali is careful to not provide either.

Which is not to say his photographs lack composition. Vitali often uses geometric elements of landscape—a hedge, a parking lot, or, most frequently, a buff-colored shoreline—to provide the kind of perspective that has been a backbone of pictorial representation since it was magically discovered during the Renaissance. At the same time, the random figures dotted here and there, at rest or at play, turn a private moment into a public one, breaking whatever spell the image might have on its own. In this way, Vitali's works teeter uneasily between narrative and document, the cinematic and the journalistic—the hyperreal and the plain real.

And therein lies the edge. Vitali's subjects portray their desire to sit back and relax, as well as their halting inability to do so. It's why the photographer is so drawn to landscapes straddling worlds both natural and man-made: a swath of lawn in a public park, a swimming pool, a pristine beach near a factory, a ski resort. "They're there to be photographed," Vitali explains of his favorite subject, beachgoers. "They're all partly naked; and they don't care. They all face the right direction and don't put up too much of a show. Like butterflies in a velvet case."

After years of producing images of blatant strife—his first journalistic assignment was the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965—aiming his camera with a lazy gaze at the relative quiet of a day at the beach is a kind of mundane paradise. "There's no judgment," Vitali says. "That's why no one has ever complained about being in my photographs—because there was never anything nasty in them."

For the record, he adds, "I like the beach—I find it very relaxing!" ■